



BITING: WHAT CAN I DO TO STOP IT?

There is no quick cure. A calm approach and patience will be your most valuable assets as a caregiver.

Angela (1½ years) is getting ready to go outside - her favorite part of the day. As the children gather by the door, Angela is squealing with delight. She looks over at Kevin (2 years) and bites his shoulder. He screams, which surprises Angela, and she begins to cry.

Adam (3 years) is playing with the Legos. As he bends down to pick a piece that just fell on the floor, Tamika (2 1/2 years) walks up and takes two of the Legos off the table. When Adam sees this, he begins shrieking at the top of his lungs. Tamika is frozen in shock. A split second later, Adam is lunging forward and sinking his teeth into Tamika's arm. She drops the Lego and runs crying to her caregiver.

Do these young children really want to hurt the children they play with? Are these mean, cruel, intentional acts of aggression? Chances are, no. Biting happens in almost every child care center and child care home that cares for young children.

To be successful child care providers, you must:

- Recognize children's reasons for biting.
- React appropriately.
- Take the proper measures to prevent further incidents.

If biting is a frequent and recurring problem, working with the child's parents is also essential.

WHY DO YOUNG CHILDREN BITE?

Biting is a natural part of children's development.

- Infants and toddlers put everything in their mouths as a part of exploration.
- Infants and toddlers may bite to relieve teething pain.
- Toddlers and young preschoolers don't have the verbal skills to fully express themselves.

- Biting brings about a quick and dramatic response.
- Children experience many emotions (positive and negative) that are difficult for them to express and, at times, control. These emotions can be caused by numerous things: over excitement, frustration, fatigue, fear of being separated from people they love, etc.

HOW CAN I PREVENT BITING?

A good program that meets the needs of children and has a lot of equipment is key to minimizing biting.

- **Look around** your home or center.
 - ◆ Is there enough space for children to move around without bumping into each other?
 - ◆ Are there enough toys for each child to have several to choose from at any one time?
 - ◆ Do you have enough activities planned to keep the children involved and interested?

A conflict over a toy or personal space could be enough to cause a child to bite.

- **Know the temperaments** of the children in your care. Children may be more likely to bite if:
 - ◆ They are more aggressive and physical.
 - ◆ They have difficulty expressing their feelings in words.

- **Look for patterns** in a frequent biter.

- ◆ Does the biter focus on one child? You may want to keep them separated as much as possible.
- ◆ Do toys seem to be the cause of many biting incidents? You may need more (or duplicate) toys so every child has several to choose from any one time.
- ◆ Does a particular activity or situation tend to cause biting?

- **Encourage the use of the words** to express feelings and emotions. Help children understand that words can be used to express feelings. You may need to teach the children words that are appropriate. Children who can verbally express themselves will be less likely to act out physically.
- **Recognize good behavior** when it happens. Most children look for attention. If they get it during positive behaviors, they will be more likely to continue those behaviors.

HOW SHOULD I REACT?

Remember, biters are usually looking for help and/or attention. Expect that biting may occur at some time with every infant or toddler. Your task is to carefully and thoughtfully handle the situation, and move on, so as not to reward the child with your attention.

- **STOP** the action. Say “NO!” or “STOP!”
- Quickly assess the situation to determine the cause of the biting.
- Is the child hungry or teething? Do you have something appropriate for the child to chew on?
- Attend to the victim. Wash area with soap and water, apply cold compress if swollen. Comfort the child.
- Talk to the biter.
 - ◆ Tell the biter, “Biting hurts! Teeth are not for biting children. Teeth are for eating food.”
 - ◆ If you think the child bit for emotional reasons, you can say, “It’s O.K. to be upset (mad, frustrated, excited, etc.) It’s NOT O.K. to bite.” Tell the child what he can do next time he experiences that emotion such as, “You can say ‘My toy!’” Tell him, “You can call out my name and I will come help you,” or something like that.
- If it is an older child, you can ask her what a better solution might have been.
- Redirect the child to another area. This might mean feeding the child, putting her down for a nap or involving her with another toy or activity. Stay with that child until she becomes involved in the new activity.

- Finish the interaction on a positive note. Reassure the biter that he is still important to you and that you still care about him.

AS A CAREGIVER, NEVER:

- Bite the child back.
- Encourage the victim to bite the child.
- Humiliate the child.
- Spank or hit the child.

HOW SHOULD I INFORM THE PARENTS?

Let the parents know that biting is a normal part of children’s development. Inform them of your policy before any incidents occur.

Biter’s parents:

- Inform parents that their child bit someone.
- Stress the severity or mildness of the incident.
- Assure parents that you have taken care of the situation and further reprimands are not necessary.
- If this is a recurring problem, work with the parents on a plan of action that will be reinforced in both the home and at child care.

Victim’s parents:

- Inform parents that their child was bitten.
- Assure parents that you have taken care of the situation and that you are taking measures to prevent further incidents.
- Explain to them what your plan of action is, if they ask.

BUT WHAT IF I’VE TRIED IT ALL AND NOTHING IS WORKING?

It is your job as a caregiver to ensure the safety of all children in your care. If one child is jeopardizing the safety of others by frequently biting, action must be taken. Sometimes, no matter how hard you try to fix the situation, no matter how patient you are, a child may just not be a good match with your program. After talking to the parents, the best thing for the child may be to move her to a new child care setting. As this can be very upsetting for the child and her parents, it is important to be helpful and compassionate. This should be your last resort, after exhausting all other possibilities.

SUCCESSFUL COPING AND PREVENTION WILL DEPEND ON:

- A well rounded and equipped program.
- Appropriate supervision.
- Your knowledge of and experience with children's development.
- Your reaction to the incident(s).
- Your follow through.
- Parental reinforcement of the techniques used.

SAMPLE NOTICE TO PARENTS

OUCH!

Today your son or daughter was bitten by another child.

Location:

Date:

Time:

Comments:

Signed,

Caregiver

Division of Child Care Licensing

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